RELIGION OR GOSPEL
Isaiah 29:13-16
Mark 2:15-17
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Howard Moody, who has become rather well known for his creative leadership at New York's Judson Memorial Church, once said: "Both the Old and New Testaments make it very clear that the major obstacle to restoration of authentic piety to the people is usually religion." (Who's Killing The Church? P. 86)

Our scripture lessons this morning substantiate that assertion. Speaking on behalf of the God of Israel, the prophet Isaiah said, "this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips" - that is to say, they are very religious - but "Their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote." - that is , they're saying the right religious things, but in their hearts and minds and wills they are miles away from my intent for them.

In the incident described in the second chapter of Mark's Gospel - a prototype, by the way, of a lot of other similar occasions in the life of Jesus - he was sitting at table with a group of very unsavory characters. Some proper, religious types saw it, were offended by it, questioned it, and revealed - here, at the beginning of his public ministry, that he was going to have persistant and unrelenting conflict not with crime, immorality, atheism - but with religion and its most respected representatives.

The conflict between religion and the Gospel is perhaps the clearest, single theme that emerges from even a superficial reading of the New Testament. My suggestion this morning is that the conflict is still very much alive and well in the twentieth century.

Commenting on our situation William Stringfellow has written: "As I find it, religion in Ameria is characteristically atheistic or agnostic. Religion has virtually nothing to do with God and has little to do with the practical lives of men in society. Religion seems, mainly, to have to do with religion." (A ~~Private and Public Faith, P.8~~)

And before him, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was caught up in perhaps the clearest expression of the conflict between religon and the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our time - the Nazi era in Germany - left behind a suggestion that has been intriguing and fascinating Christian thinkers ever since. He said that the world has "come of age" and that in a world come of age we need to become "religionless Christians."

I would like to hold up the idea this morning that Religion and Christianity are different: that there is a lot of the former around but not much of the latter: that to be "religious" is not necessarily to be a Christian, or - more to the point - to be a Christian is not necessarily to be "religious" at least in terms of any popular definition of that word. But before we begin to think about our situation let's go back and look again at Jesus and the conflict.

I believe it is basic to any understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to see, to acknowledge, and to reflect upon these three simple statements of fact:

one - Jesus never heard of the word Christianity

two - Jesus was not very religious

three - Jesus was hated and ultimately crucified by men who were very religious

The problem in the first century was that the faith of Israel, the faith of Jesus, had become the religion of Judaism. And it is not too difficult to understand why. More than 500 years before Jesus the Jews had undergone the most traumatic experience in their life as a nation. The Babylonians had invaded, conquered, leveled the Temple and carried them off into exile. For all practical purposes Israel disappeared. When, by historical good fortune - or God's providence - they were released from Babylonian captivity, allowed to return to the land and to restore the nation they were understandably anxious that the same errors that had caused that tragedy not be repeated again.

And so they became obsessed with their law and rituals. If God had punished them for their unfaithfulness, they would never again be unfaithful. They would obey the law' to the letter and then some. They became obsessed with purity and cleanliness and exclusiveness - and it's understandable. Having nearly lost their national identity once, they weren't about to risk it again. The result, however, was the emergence of a religion with its own cult, rules, symbols, and rituals, cut off from the rest of humanity. One scholar describes it in these terms:

> "The Lord of all peoples had become the party leader of the legalists, obedience to the ruler of history had become a finespun technique of piety." (Gunther Bornkamm, Jesus of Nazareth, P. 37)

In the first century, Palestine was a Roman Province, governed very loosely through the offices of various puppet rulers. It was a threatening situation. And in it the provincialism and parochialism and exclusiveism of the Jews is totally understandable.

And along came Jesus, this Nazareth carpenter, born on the wrong side of the tracks, with the supreme audacity to ignore and contradict everything that the pious religionists thought was important. From the very beginning everything he did and said stood in the sharpest contrast to what the religious Jews were doing and saying. People like that still get crucified in one way or another.

Consider his friends - those with whom he had to do - the people with whom he stood and ate and talked - the people he obviously loved. In the Beatitudes he drew a picture of them: the poor, the hungry and thirsty, the mourners, the peace lovers, the persecuted. And the one thing they all had in common was that they stood outside the perimeter of religion. Poor people weren't religious - they couldn't afford to be. They were despised because their poverty prevented them from even considering fulfilling the demands of religion - tithes, sacrficies, temple taxes.

He touched lepers - which act in itself constituted the breaking of a handful of ceremonial laws. But more importantly leprosy was regarded as God's penalty for sin. He befriended tax-collectors, despicable traitors to the national cause. He was seen in the presence of prostitutes - who wouldn't have been caught dead in the temple. He even told a story one time that had a samaritan - a racial half-breed and theological heretic - come out as the "good guy" - while a Temple priest comes out looking pretty bad. If the Samaritans are neighbors, God's children, the whole world is a neighborhood; there are no barriers any more; no outsiders, which means there are no insiders; no heretics, which means that tedious religious orthodoxy is suddenly seen to be tedious religious idolatry.

In particular Jesus was in conflict with two religious types. The one was the Pharisees and their Scribes - who show up in Mark 2 - the "super-religionists"; the extremists; the ones most obsessed with doctrinal orthodoxy and legal purity. They were good men, devoted, loyal, commited, patriotic, generous to a fault. But in Jesus they saw an ultimate threat to their religion and they saw accurately.

The Saducees, on the other hand, were typically wealthy, privileged men, many of them from priestly families. Their commitment was to the status quo, to ("religion in general".) They were willing to compromise with paganism, with Roman influences, here and there, if it meant keeping the peace. After all, what did it really matter? Religion is religion. They saw in Jesus something far too precise for their liking. He took it too seriously. It's one thing to discuss God's love for all men: it's another thing to eat a dinner in the home of a social outcast. It's interesting that scholars are now thinking that these compromisers may have been more responsible than the Pharisees for arranging his death. The Pharisees were opposed to him - but the Sadducees had the connections to pull off an execution.

In any case, neither group liked him. His ministry was in sharp contrast to their religion. In his teaching there was no trace of their divisiveness, their exclusiveness. In fact, when they ask, he tells them that he has not come to deal with the holy and pure and good - but with the lost. Jesus' friends are the outcasts: ("this exhausted flock that has no shepherd":) these people who have been rejected, scorned and excluded by religion. The Gospel was for them. Wm ?

They didn't have to hide their need behind a facade of righteousness and respectability. They could confess their need for love and acceptance. They could weep when they were sad, and laugh out bud when they were happy. They were people the world couldn't help; people totally out of touch with any help religion might offer. The Gospel was for them: they were open to the unconditional love of God: they were open to God's mercy and grace and forgiveness. They were the ones who could weep the tears of joy when they sensed that in the name of God, this Jesus loved them.

Jesus Christ, we believe, was the bearer of Good News - Gospel. He was the flesh and blood incarnation of God's love. There was little similarity between him and the religion of the first century. Let's think about that: let's focus on religion.

It is a truism in our culture that "religion is a good thing - it doesn't matter what kind it is, so long as it is believed sincerely." I think that is wrong. Historians have noted that people have always used religion as a means of self assertion. And that religion notoriously thrives on condemnation of other people.

As religion Christianity brought the Spanish Inquisition - devoted to the rooting out of theological heresy. Jesus loved Samaritans - heretics. Christian religionists burned them at the stake. Anti-semitism has its roots in Christian religion. The Jew has always been the ultimate outcast, the complete heretic. And it is no accident that the culture that has been most religiously Christian, the culture that spawned Johann Sebastian Bach, and Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, also gave birth to Adolph Hitler and the gas chambers and 6,000,000 Jewish corpses.

In American history there has been no more consistantly religious and pious organization than the Ku Klux Klan, and in the name of Jesus Christ, it has burned, plundered, bombed and lynched, quoting scripture all the while and meeting under a firey cross. And no one need doubt the sincerity of the Klan about religion. The radical right wing today; the groups that are most racist, most nationalistic, most militaristic: the groups that would send the niggers back to Africa and bomb the Commies into oblivion, spew their venom in the name of God and country. They depend for their very existence on a naive American assumption that religion has to be O.K., and if the name of Jesus Christ can be associated with it, it has to be alright. Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, very pious,-religious people are in the process of committing national suicide. And, again, we need not doubt the sincerity of their relgion. The truth is that when Christianity becomes a religion it acts like a religion which means that it forgets the Gospel.

Now, we live in a very religious culture: a culture that it is not unlike the temper of the times in Jesus' day. Religion in the general sense - not Christianity, but religion - pervades our culture. God in the general sense - not the God and Father of Jesus Christ, but the vague, nondescript God who likes Americans better than anyone else - is extremely popular. He even made it into the Academy Awards Tuesday night - in the person of Charlton Heston whose career has been built on Hollywood's rape of the Judeo Christian tradition. I love to contempate God laughing in his heaven, by the way: and I am certain that he doubled over when Heston was applauded and the young Indian girl booed.

We have, in addition, contemporary counterparts to Pharisees and Saducees. The pharisaic among us are the "super-Christians", whose religion excludes anyone and everyone who does not see things and do things their way: the ones who bask in their own sense

of righteousness while in all sincerity condemn the rest of humanity to hell - in the name of the one who sat at table with sinners and tax collectors.

The contemporary Saducees are the cultural religionists, the ones who believe that religion is a pretty good thing so long as it doesn't interfere with the status quo.

Although they are miles apart theologically, they sometimes are allies when it comes to religion. In the recent discussion of the legality of distributing Gideon Bibles in the public schools, it was generally agreed that a little religion never hurt anybody, even though that decision, it seems to me, now makes it necessary to grant the same privilege to any group who wants to exercise it. The Jews ought now to be allowed to distribute the Torah, the Moslems the Koran and so on, because it's religious, it's believed sincerely, and religion is a good thing.

I think the Gospel stands in judgement of both positions: I believe Jesus himself would say ("a pax on both of your houses".) I think he would ask the "super-Christian" about his exclusiveness, and I think he would push the compromiser to the wall about his vague God who is to be invoked at every opportunity but never taken very seriously.

Now, in conclusion, let's clear the air. Jesus was not anti-religion. He was a Jew. He practiced his religion. He went to the Temple. He prayed and fasted and observed the ceremonial feast days. It may have sounded like it, but I have not been trying to convince you that all religion is contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ - just that it can be - and often is. I have been trying to say that it is not easy to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ: people will not always understand, because our culture is more interested in religion for the sake of religion than it is in the Gospel.

But ultimately I have been trying to say that the Gospel is a matter of grace; a matter of God's unconditional love for you and me quite apart from anything we've done or not done. It's a matter finally of standing with those poor, broken people he so obviously loved. It's a matter of seeing - as they were forced to see - that if God's love for us depends on our religiosity - we're all in trouble. It's a matter of admitting our own powerlessness - of pushing aside all the religious games we play in order to make ourselves feel good - and of finally saying to God - "You must love me as I am."

And the miracle - the Gospel - the Good News - is that he does. AMEN

Father, free us from the fear that if we weren't religious you wouldn't love us. Free us with the power of your love, so that being here in worship together will be a response of gratitude and great joy: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN